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ABSTRACT

Advice is provided for administrators and teachers who have a physically handicapped student teacher under their supervision. The following topics are discussed: (1) adaptations that may be needed in the physical environment of the school; (2) preparing the pupils and staff to accept and understand a handicapped student teacher; (3) when and if helping a handicapped student teacher is appropriate; and (4) standards required of a handicapped student teacher. (JD)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE HANDICAPPED STUDENT TEACHER

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Meeting the Needs of the Handicapped Student Teacher

PL 93-112, The Federal Rehabilitation Act, Section 504, mandates that

> "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual... shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be deneid the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."[1]

The regulations to the Rehabilitation Act state specifically that qualified handicapped persons may not be denied admission or be subjected to discrimination in admission or recruitment to postsecondary education and vocational education programs and activities. This legislation has lifted barriers that previously prevented handicapped students from enrolling in colleges of education. As expected, many of these handicapped students are now successfully meeting and completing education program requirements, including student teaching. While colleges of education have made some advances in adapting to the needs of these handicapped students, public schools have often been reluctant to accept handicapped student teachers. This reluctance of some administrators and teachers may stem from feelings of inadequacy in meeting the needs of handicapped student teachers. This paper, therefore, provides administrators and teachers with information and guidance which will help them to understand and to meet the needs of handicapped student teachers.

How handicapped are these student teachers?

Handicaps range from extremely mild to substantial. Some student teachers may have visual impairments (ranging from wearing thick glasses to total blindness); hearing impairments (ranging from wearing hearing aids to total deafness); or physical impairments (ranging from a slight limp to paralysis of all four limbs). Obviously, the type and degree of the student teacher's handicap will determine the type and degree of adaptations required.

Can they really teach?

Of course they can. By the time they have reached the student teaching stage of their careers, they have successfully completed a teacher training program. They have, by necessity, demonstrated more motivation, courage, adaptability and perseverence than that demanded of non-handicapped students. They are accustomed to meeting obstacles and overcoming those barriers to success. As a group, handicapped student teachers tend to be very serious, dedicated, and goal-oriented.

What adaptations are needed?

Ask them! Write or phone them as early as possible to ask what kinds of assistance they will require. Immediately send copies of the curriculum guides, books, and materials they will be required to use. Let them know exactly what will be expected of them. Then, they will be able to indicate what assistance or adaptations they will require to meet those expectations.

In some cases, certain adaptations in the physical environment may be necessary. For example, if a student teacher is in a wheelchair, information regarding the height and width of that wheelchair should be requested well before the student teacher's arrival at the school. Most tables (such as the ones in school cafeterias) and most desks (such as the ones student teachers use) are not high enough for a wheelchair to roll under. Wheelchairs generally require at least 26 inches clearance and sometimes may require more. Often the school maintenance person can fasten extenders to the legs of tables and desks to gain the necessary height.

Another problem faced by student teachers who are confined to wheelchairs is accessibility to the classrooms, restrooms, and the school building itself. The location of steps in the school building should be considered. Ramps may have to be built which conform to the recommended one inch elevation for every 12 inches of length.[2] Clearly, the restroom must be accessible. Toilet stalls must be wide enough to accomodate a wheelchair. Sometimes these can be easily remedied by removing the door and parts of the frame and replacing them with an opaque curtain.

Although it is not an official responsibility of the administration or supervising teachers, handicapped students greatly appreciate offers to assist them with housing arrangements, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the community. A visually impaired person, for example, may wish to live along a bus route or within walking distance

of the school. A physically impaired person may need a wheelchair accessible apartment with nearby street parking for a wheelchair van.

What should be said to handicapped student teachers?

Many people feel somewhat uncomfortable the first few times they talk to handicapped student teachers, particularly when they discuss handicaps. It helps them to know that handicapped student teachers do not feel uncomfortable when discussing their handicaps. They have accepted their handicaps as a fact of life and can therefore talk about them freely and comfortably.

People commonly stumble over words like "see" and "look" when they talk to visually impaired people, or over words like "run" and "walk" when they talk to physically impaired people. Yet, handicapped people use these words frequently and easily.

As a general rule, one should speak to handicapped student teachers as one speaks to other student teachers. However, there are two exceptions to this general rule. First, if a student teacher is deaf and reads lips, then speakers should make certain that the deaf student teacher can clearly see their lips as they speak. Also the speaker must talk normally, without exaggerated lip or tongue movements and without increased volume which distorts lip movements. Second, if student teachers are visually impaired, verbal directions and explanations should be precise. For example, rather than pointing across the room and saying, "The

books are over there", the supervising teacher should say, "The books are kept on a shelf about ten feet to your right--come, let me show you where they are."

What should a supervising teacher say to a class?

Tell classes that they will be having a student teacher who happens to have a handicap. Tell them that they may be doing things a bit differently while the student teacher is teaching them. Present this information in a matter-of-fact manner. Do not indicate that the student teacher will need their help or assistance. Handicapped student teachers need pupils' respect--not their sympathy.

Young pupils often have intense curiousity about handicaps. Sometimes this curiousity is based on the fear that such handicaps may "happen" to them. It may be helpful to have handicapped student teachers explain to their pupils the cause of the handicap. Pupils are often fascinated by explanations of how hearing aids or wheelchairs work. Such explanations assure the pupils that such aids are nothing to fear. However, the decision to share such personal information should be the student teacher's.

What should be said to the faculty and staff?

If a student teacher's handicap necessitates any adaptations on the part of the faculty and staff, their assistance should be requested. Explain what the faculty and staff can expect from the student teacher. Then tell the faculty and staff what the student teacher will expect from them. Discuss with them methods for

interacting comfortably with handicapped people.

Should extra help be given handicapped student teachers?

Misguided sympathy for handicapped people makes it easy to give them too much help. Often such help is both unneeded and unwanted. Most handicapped student teachers are quite independent, but they will readily request help when they need it. Obviously, hearing impaired student teachers will need some form of assistance,either from the supervising teacher or from the students, if they are unable to hear announcements on the intercom or bells that signal recess, lunch, or change of classrooms. However, one must guard against the tendancy to offer help when it is not appropriate. For example, if a student teacher is presenting a lesson to the class and two pupils are becoming disruptive, the supervising teacher may perceive it as helpful to quietly remove the disruptive children and thereby allow the student teacher to continue uninterrupted. Rather than helping, such "assistance" has deprived the student teacher of the opportunity to learn how to deal with disruptive children.

At times, handicapped student teachers are reluctant to ask for assistance even though such assistance is needed. When asked, "Would you like some help?" they may answer, "No, I don't need any help." The supervising teacher should then respond warmly, "You obviously don't need any help; but I'd like to help if you want me to." Occassionally it may be necessary to gently but firmly point out that they should become more aware of situations in which they need help.

When student teachers are overly-dependent, they must be encouraged and assisted to become independent. The supervising teacher might say things like, "It is difficult, but you will eventually do this for yourself in your own classroom--so, let's devise some ways for you to do it."

Handicapped student teachers often need assistance initially meeting faculty and staff. Faculty and staff members are sometimes reticent to approach handicapped student teachers. If the faculty and staff have been properly prepared, and if the supervising teacher guides the initial introductions, both the faculty and the student teacher will be more relaxed in their subsequent encounters.

Initially, handicapped student teachers will probably need help in orienting themselves to the school buildings. Physically impaired student teachers will need assistance in determining the most easily accessible routes from one part of the facility to another. Visually impaired student teachers will need several trips through the facility before they can develop cognitive maps that allow them to navigate independently. They need to learn the location of the cafeteria, the place where the food line forms, the route they must follow, and the location of the faculty tables. They will need to learn not only where the restrooms are located, but also the location of the lavatories, toilet stalls and towel dispensers. After the student teacher's arrival, other barriers to accessibility may become apparent.

These should be freely discussed with the student teacher and any necessary adaptations should be made.

Should the requirements be lowered?

Absolutely not! Never lower standards or accept inferior performance from handicapped student teachers. Expect them to meet the same standards of excellence required of any other student teacher. However, recognize that they may need to meet those requirements in a slightly different way. For example, if student teachers are requried to turn in written lesson plans one week in advance, visually impaired students may be given permission to record their lesson plans on cassette tape; or they may be given permission to write them in braille and then read them aloud to the supervising teacher. However, the requirement of turning the lesson plans in one week in advance should be retained. All student teachers are being prepared to be competent, independent professionals. Supervisors of handicapped student teachers will be doing them a disservice if they do not prepare their student teachers to meet the requirements that they will face in the real world.

The Challenge

Supervising teachers are often perceived by student teachers as being the people who have the most significant effect on them during their student teaching experience (Karmos & Jacko, 1977). Such influence on handicapped student teachers significantly affects their future success--or failure--as professional educators. Adapting classrooms and schools to meet the needs of handicapped

student teachers can be challenging. It requires a great deal of creativity. But the experience can be rewarding. The methods suggested here should make the student teaching experience much more satisfying to both supervising teachers and handicapped student teachers. These methods should also help supervising teachers meet the challenge of working with handicapped student teachers.

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